Examination Of Conscience by Virtues and Vices

Pursuit of the Christian ideal is more than being simply moral, we are called to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Mathew 5:48).

A daily or regular examination of conscience, sometimes referred to as an examen, is a practice that goes back to the very early days of Christianity. It is a reflection on one's thoughts, words, actions, and omissions to identify areas where one can improve.

The idea is not limited to Christians. Ben Franklin kept a daily record of his activities and failings in pursuit of perfection. Though not particularly a Christian, Franklin chose 13 moral virtues that he wished to not offend, and daily checked that he was keeping those virtues. Franklin was inspired mostly in this endeavor by Aristotle.

There are many examinations of conscience that use the ten commandments as a guide. Those are good for starting out, but keeping the commandments are a lot simpler than pursuing perfection. The rich young man, for example, was unable to follow Jesus (*otherwise referred to as being a Christian*) even though he kept the commandments from a young age (Matthew 19:16-30)

Therefore this list of questions for yourself is divided by the 7 heavenly virtues – those three chief virtues identified by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:13, and the four virtues identified in Wisdom 8:7. I've also included in the heading the traditional vice that opposes the virtue, a pairing made in Dante's *Divine Comedy* and elsewhere.

This is only a start, you should of course use this to develop your own examen. I will warn you, though, that it will grow. Perfection is a goal you will pursue all your life, it will only get harder and more involved as you draw closer to God. However, as Thomas Aquinas wrote, "To stand on the way of the Lord is to move backwards."

Take time each day, or each week, or on an otherwise regular basis to see how well you are keeping the virtues. Like any soldier, drilling and practicing and keeping a vigilant watch is critical to overcoming an enemy on the prowl (1 Peter 5:8).

Charity/Love – Sloth/Acedia

- Do I think of and treat everyone with love, even those who are hurtful to me?
- Do I only tolerate my enemies, or do I show them the same love as I do my friends, as Christ commanded?
- Do I procrastinate, kill time, or watch the clock?
- Do I waste time wishing that things were other than they are?
- Do I love others as I do myself?
- Do I do everything for the love of God?
- Do I discount my own life or efforts are unworthy?

Hope – Envy

- Do I believe, and act as though God will meet my daily needs?
- Do I believe, and act as though God's will is in my best interest?

Faith – Pride

- Do I think that my actions, efforts, or status will provide for me and my family?
- Do I act upon my fears – including fears of financial loss, death, suffering, and evil?
- Do I trust God's word about what is evil and good?
- Do I trust God's word that he will provide for my needs?
- Do I think that I have merited my blessings or salvation by what I have done?
- Do I think that my achievements, honors, or actions make me more worthy than any other human being, including my enemies, my friends, my family, celebrities, politicians, and people whose sin I believe I can see?

Prudence – Greed/Avarice

- Do I seek to possess more than I need?
- Do I ensure that others have what they need?
- Do I tithe from what God has given me?

Fortitude – Anger/Wrath

- Do I bear wrongs patiently?
- Am I holding any grudges?
- Do I endure suffering and pain without complaint?
- Do I face my fears to overcome them, or do I seek to avoid them?
- Do I endure trials, even embracing them as they draw me closer to God?
- Do I seek to die to myself every day, taking up my cross?

Justice – Lust/Luxuria

- Do I desire things that I do not need?
- Do I desire things that will have no benefit to me?
- Do I give God, my employer, and my government their just due?
- Do I see that those around me have their needs met, before pursuing things that I only want?
- Do I practice chastity in thoughts and actions?
- Do I treat others as I expect myself or my loved ones to be treated?

Temperance – Gluttony

- Do I make choices based on my will to serve God or my selfish desires?
- Do I seek pleasure more than I do God?
- Do I worry about having enough time for pleasurable pursuits?
- Do I abuse pleasures by indulging them too often?
- Is there anything in my life that I do to excess, to the detriment of my spiritual life or duties to God, my family, or authority?

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Paul Nowak is a husband and father of 7, who also happens to be a writer and author. He has written *The Way of the Christian Samurai* among other books.

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Charity

discipline, morality, morals, virtue

Seven Times Down, Eight Times Up

Enough

Edit

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